

**Date: Sunday July 12, 2009**

**Scripture: Mark 6:14-29**

**Title: “Mutter or Make a Difference?”**

**The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): John the Baptist speaks out against wrong. Are we willing to stand up and speak out against that which we know goes against God?**

**The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): John may have died a brutal, ugly death, but the positive difference John the Baptist makes never dies.**

**(Remember, it’s all about God!)**

A few years back I read a fascinating study about the influence that people can have on one another. In this study, scientists looking at human behavior took groups of people into a room, had them be seated, and then showed them two lines on a board labeled as line A and line B. Now in actuality, line A was the longer of the two lines. But within each group of people, there was one person who had been told to insist that line B was the longer of the two lines. So, with each group the facilitator would show the lines and then ask the group which line was longer. What do you think happened? Well, every time there were initial responses correctly identifying line A as the longer of the two lines. But before long, the person prepared to speak up for line B would begin arguing that line B was clearly longer, and in every group, he was able to convince others that he was right. Time and again, people who had spoken up for line A ended up agreeing that line B was longer. By the end of each group, not one person would state that the individual arguing for line B was wrong. Isn't that interesting?

I share this example this morning because when it came to Jesus' cousin, John

the Baptist; he wasn't the least bit afraid of telling people when they were wrong. John believed so strongly in truth, that he was willing to tell the truth to people even if it might mean that he would be made to pay a price for doing it. That's exactly what happened when he had the boldness to speak the truth to Herod and told Herod that what he was doing in his life was wrong.

Here in today's reading in the Gospel of Mark we encounter Herod who was known as Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, who ruled over the region of Galilee during the time of Jesus' ministry. Just like his father, Herod Antipas wasn't so much concerned about being a good ruler and taking care of his people. Just like his father, Herod Antipas was primarily concerned about using his power for his own pleasure, to get the things out of life that he wanted to have. It seems that one of the things that Herod Antipas wanted out of his life was his brother's wife. So, to get what he wanted, Herod Antipas divorced his own wife, his brother's wife left her husband – Herod's brother, and Herod and his sister-in-law got married.

Even though everyone else in the kingdom was too afraid to say anything, John the Baptist knew that what Herod Antipas and the former sister-in-law, now wife, did was wrong, and he let them know it was wrong. He let them know that it was wrong for the two of them to have abandoned their spouses like that. He let them know that according to God's law, what they did was an abomination—for a man to take and marry his own brother's wife.

John the Baptist spoke up and told the truth about what Herod was doing. He spoke up and told the truth even though he knew full well that there might be consequences if he did. Sure enough, there were consequences, as Herod had John

thrown into prison and eventually had John beheaded.

Reverend C. Edward Bowin writes that as we look at this gruesome story about what happened to John the Baptist, with his head being cut off and laid on a platter because he dared to speak the truth, we should be asking ourselves, are we willing to stand up for what's right even if there might be consequences? Are we willing to stand up for those things that God wants us to stand up for even if it might come at some cost to us, even if we might be made to suffer, even if we might be killed for doing so?

If we're honest, we admit that those aren't easy questions. After all, it's much more common nowadays to think in terms of what causes we're willing to war for, weapons of mass destruction that don't exist; what causes we're willing to kill others for, you are either for us or against us; what causes we're willing to make others suffer for, it's not torture if they tell us what we want to hear. But as we look at the life and death of John the Baptist, and as we look at the life and death of Jesus, we see that John and Jesus don't ask us for what causes we'd be willing to put others to death. Just the opposite, John and Jesus ask us for what causes we'd be willing to be put to death. It's like Gandhi, the great leader of India who led the movement that brought freedom to his nation, who said that he believed so strongly in the truth of his cause that he would be willing to die for it, but he said that there was no cause for which he was ever prepared to kill.

So often in our world today, people see the wrongs that are taking place around them, they see what the Herods are up to, but instead of speaking up and taking a stand for the truth—for God's truth—many people are content with just

silently shaking their heads and muttering to themselves, “Ain’t it awful!” Many people just whisper “ain’t it awful” to themselves instead of speaking up, because they know that if their voice is heard, there might be consequences, and they’re not so sure that they’re willing to pay a price for standing up for the truth.

Jim Wallis, the editor of Sojourners Magazine and a Christian author and speaker tells about how in the early spring of 1978 he and a group of fellow Christians felt that God was calling them to speak up and take a stand for peace. So they decided to try and block the trains coming in and out of the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Facility outside of Denver, Colorado. The Rocky Flats Nuclear Facility is the place where the triggers for all the nuclear warheads in the United States arsenal are made. On a certain Saturday afternoon, Jim Wallis and about 140 other Christians sat down on the railroad tracks outside the facility, not knowing exactly when the next train would be coming.

Just ten minutes after they sat down on the tracks, a winter storm began to move in. It started off as a hard rain, but soon the temperature dropped and it turned to freezing rain, then sleet, and finally to a driving snow. Within an hour or so, Wallis and the others were soaked and chilled to the bone. When doctors arrived on the scene, they advised the group to go home or else they would have a real risk of hypothermia. While many of those Christians did decide to leave, Wallis and some of the others stayed. Huddling under wet blankets, Wallis says that was the coldest night he had ever experienced in his life.

All during that night, Wallis says that his mind kept being filled with images of soldiers who across the centuries had braved the elements, who had endured

hardship, who had risked injury and death, and who had even given up their lives in order to wage war. Then, he says, it became clear to him. Why should we expect the cost of standing up for God's truth to be anything less? What would happen if we were to commit ourselves to the causes that God wants us to take a stand for with the same kind of discipline, sacrifice, and willingness to suffer that we take for granted that soldiers will have when they go to war? Wallis realized more fully that being faithful to God means a willingness to hold on to God's truth and to act on that truth no matter what. Being faithful to God means a willingness to hold on to God's truth and to act on that truth no matter what (Bowen).

About three and a half years ago I stood with a group of students from Eden Seminary and we looked up at the rooms in the Elmina Slave Castle in Ghana, West Africa where members of the clergy lived. This castle is one of many that dot the Cape Coast of Africa and is very near the castle that President Barack Obama visited over the weekend. The rooms that housed the clergy in this slave castle were directly above the dungeons that held the human beings that were classified as slaves. We stood there that day and reflected later on the horror of that discovery. We wondered, how could those clergy, how dare those clergy, why would those clergy live above the sickening, tragic, indescribable conditions of slavery and let it occur. Then it dawned on us. What are we living above today that people will question five hundred years from today – how could we, how dare we, why would we?

What are the wrongs in our lives? What are those things around us that aren't entirely the way that God wants them to be? Among a circle of friends, at work, at school, in the community, in the nation, what is it that deep down we

know we should stand up and speak out against – racism, starvation, justice for all. To whom do we need to say, “You are wrong?” – a boss, a friend, or perhaps the toughest one of all, the person in the mirror. What truth is calling our name? Keeping quiet or muttering to ourselves, “ain’t it awful” is the safe and easy thing to do. In the Gospel, John the Baptist shows us another way and calls us to do more than mutter. Today’s good news certainly isn’t how the life of John the Baptist ends – that was gruesome and grotesque. Today’s good news is that the example and difference John the Baptist offers never ends. Through the actions of John the Baptist we are reminded that the glory of God prevails – every time – and no one will ever convince me that I am wrong about that. Let us pray.

God,

To your glory we give thanks. In times of trouble and turmoil we have a choice. We can mutter to ourselves or speak up and make a difference. Strengthen us to be bold for your causes. Move us to use our abilities to work on your behalf. Make us secure to speak up and speak out when your purposes are at stake. For all the ways you bless us to be emblazoned for you, we give thanks. And we pray, in Jesus name, Amen.

Offering: As we prepare to offer our money today, let’s remember that what we give helps this faith community speak and work on behalf of God.

Dedication: Lord, accept and bless these gifts given today and our willingness to share your good news with all others. This we pray, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth assured that we have been blessed in this holy place and that the love of Christ sustains us in all circumstances. Go forth with that good news. Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Source:

C. Edward Bowen, Crafton United Presbyterian Church; [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com) ; 2009.

